

Parents accidentally confuse their children's names more often when the names sound alike

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When choosing baby names, parents often want something that is pleasing to the ear. Some even turn to alliteration when naming multiple children. But according to a new psychology study from The University of Texas at Austin, parents set themselves up for speech errors when they give their children similar-sounding names.

The findings, published online in December in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *PLOS One*, show that what many people consider to be "Freudian slips," may be a quirk in the brain's information-retrieval process. The study was authored by Zenzi Griffin, professor of psychology at UT Austin, and Thomas Wangerman, formerly of Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta.

"Because name substitutions are increased by factors like name similarity and physical similarity, they should not be seen as purely Freudian or reflecting preferences for one child over another," Griffin says. "In other words, people shouldn't read too much into the errors."

The researchers conducted online surveys with 334 respondents with one or more siblings. As part of the study, the subjects were asked to rate similarities in appearance and personality with their siblings, as well as the frequency of their parent accidentally transposing their [names](#).

According to the results, participants whose names shared initial

(Jamie/Jason) or final (Amanda/Samantha) sounds with a sibling reported that their parents accidentally called them by the wrong name more often than those without such name overlap. This was especially prevalent among [younger siblings](#) who were close in age and of the same gender with their siblings. The majority of respondents who reported low rates of name substitutions were first-born siblings, which may be due to their names being used more often, the researchers note.

A subset (121 respondents) reported they were often called by names of other [family members](#). And 20 respondents stated they were called by the name of the family pet. Griffin says this unexpected finding shows how social and situational factors play a role in how parents retrieve names when addressing their child directly.

For example, a mother stands in the kitchen and wants her child to come to dinner. The last time she stood in the kitchen and summoned someone to dinner it was Fluffy the dog. The similarity of the situation and repetition of the words, "come to dinner, Fluffy," primes her to say the dog's name again when calling out to the child.

"It is tempting to attribute such mistakes to the animals' status as family members and child-substitutes," Griffin says. "However, it seems unlikely that parents would make such errors so readily if they were labeling family members in photographs."

Research on speech errors has shown that people commonly substitute words that belong to the same category, but sound nothing alike, such as labeling a couch as a sofa, or a lion as a tiger, Griffin says. And when a word overlaps in meaning and sound (pear/peach), the intended word is more likely to be unintentionally substituted for its similar-sounding counterpart.

"Although much work has considered how names affect self-identity,

social categorization and social interactions, little is known about the consequences of personal name choice on speaking," Griffin says. This study begins to fill the gap."

More information: [dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0084444](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0084444)

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